

News from Washington: Veterans Issues

commentary

U.S. REP. JOHN B. LARSON

For more than 60 years, when someone becomes a member of America's armed forces, the U.S. government makes a promise to them that once their military service has ended, they are guaranteed a lifetime of adequate health care services through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). This promise is the least that we as a nation can do for the brave men and women who serve, sacrifice, and put their lives on the line in our military.

It is therefore disconcerting for me as a member of the House Armed Services Committee, when I see the government and the VA not fully meeting this commitment to our veterans. It should be clear that the problem does not lie with the caring and dedicated men and women who make up the staff of our VA facilities, rather, the fault lies with the administration and Congress. Recently, the House and Senate were faced with a number of choices this year regarding funding for veterans healthcare. Unfortunately, rather than significantly increasing benefits, Congress voted to endorse new and increased fees and co-pays

for many veterans for their doctor's visits and for their prescription drugs.

The budget resolution conference report passed by both Houses this spring assumes the enactment of legislation to include a new enrollment fee and to increase fees and co-pays for over two million veterans who fall into "Priority 7" and "Priority 8" designations - veterans who do not have service-related disabilities and do not meet certain income guidelines.

I am absolutely opposed to these new and increased fees being imposed on veterans, and for this reason, I voted against the Budget Resolution passed by Congress on April 11.

Regardless of the category they are assigned to by the VA, veterans deserve to have the promises made to them kept by the federal government. Congress should not simply change its mind when it comes to keeping its promises. Some in Congress have tried to explain voting in favor of this plan by saying that these changes have not yet been technically enacted. Unfortunately, these changes were specifically endorsed in the budget resolution and will be enacted under the assumption that the increases would generate more than \$1 billion in savings.

Additionally, even though Congress included an increase of more than 12 percent for the overall VA budget, Congress cut funding directed specifically at veterans

healthcare by a total of \$6.2 billion over ten years. So what seems to be an overall increase, isn't what it appears when it comes to healthcare for our veterans.

This spring, I asked the House Committee of Government Reform Special Investigations Division to conduct a study in the First Congressional District to determine how these changes to VA healthcare would affect veterans. For a copy of the study, please see: <http://www.house.gov/larson/vets.htm>.

The following is a summary of its findings using many of the VA's own numbers:

1. The budget resolution will freeze enrollment for Priority 8 veterans in the VA healthcare system, preventing an estimated 1,800 veterans in Connecticut from enrolling to receive care.

2. Increased fees will likely cause over 19,000 Connecticut veterans, including 6,500 veterans receiving active VA healthcare, to drop out of the VA health system entirely because they cannot afford to remain enrolled.

3. Those who do not drop out of the VA healthcare system will be forced to pay hundreds more for their healthcare. Veterans who receive prescription drugs from the VA and who fill a typical number of prescriptions a year could face new fees amounting to nearly \$600.

Some would argue that reducing the number of veterans with access to their healthcare system will make more resources avail-

able for more needy veterans. I would say that more resources are needed for all veterans. Instead of punishing some veterans with new and increased fees, overall funding must be increased so that we can keep our promises to all who have served our nation in uniform.

There is some good news on the horizon for our veterans: presently, there is a strong movement in the House of Representatives to force the leadership to allow a vote on a bill that will allow disabled veterans with more than 20 years of service to receive both disability compensation as well as retirement pay. The bill, H.R. 303, the Retired Pay Restoration Act, would immediately benefit the more than half a million disabled American veterans. Due to the fact that the House Leadership has not scheduled a vote on the bill, which currently has 320 co-sponsors, members are signing a "discharge petition," which is a procedure that would require the leadership to bring a bill to the floor for a vote. The petition needs a majority of member's signatures - 218 - in order to move forward. As of June 26, 201 members had signed the petition.

During the next few weeks and months I will keep the First District up to date on these and other critical issues concerning veterans. I invite you to visit my Web site at www.house.gov/larson <<http://www.house.gov/larson>>. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions or leave any comment on this or any issue before Congress - I would like to hear from you.